

August 13, 2023  
Faith in Exile: Watch Out!  
2 Peter 2:1-3  
Vernon Advent Christian Church

[Introduction]

At the end of chapter 1, Peter lays out for us the foundation for our faith, which is the inspired Word of God. He is writing from prison and knows that his journey this side of the fully realized Kingdom of God is coming to an end and he instructs his readers to stand firmly on the truth of God's Word. However, in contrast to this truth, he also knows that false prophets and teachers are an ever-present threat to God's people. So, in light of this contrast, he begins chapter 2 by comparing the godly prophets and teachers who spoke the word of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit with the false prophets who have plagued God's people down through the ages. If you are able, please stand with me as I read the Word of God.

[Read 2 Peter 2:1-3]

The verbs used in this passage to describe the false prophets and teachers are all future tense. Some understand this to mean that the false teachers were not yet present in the churches that were made up of the exiles that Peter was writing to. But later in this same letter, Peter indicates that they were already there. Also, we find evidence in the writings of Paul in his letters that not only were these false teachers already present during this same time frame, but they were wreaking havoc on the church. Thomas Schreiner, in his commentary on 2 Peter makes this observation, "By using the future tense, Peter probably is alluding to prophecies by Jesus that pointed to the coming of these false teachers." The Lord knew that they would come and warned about their coming but their presence does not negate His sovereign control over His church. As the Lord himself said, "I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." (Matt. 16:18)

It's interesting that in this passage concerning false teachers there are no direct exhortations or commands found. Rather, Peter just describes, in great detail, the false teachers and their evil ways. It's as if he is holding up a most wanted poster with some sketchy looking characters on it, saying, "This is what these guys look like, so watch out for them!" So, chapter 2 serves as a warning. In our text, Peter is saying, "Beware of, or watch out for, false teachers because they can only lead us away from the very words of truth and they leave a trail of spiritual devastation in their wake!"

In our passage today, Peter gives us seven reasons to watch out for false teachers. The first is because they are a continuous threat to God's people. Look with me again at vs.1. "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you..." The first phrase refers back to the history of God's people in the Old Testament. The Israelites fell prey to, and were led astray over and over again by, the lies of those who offered empty promises in the name of the false gods of the Canaanites and instead of finding peace with an all-loving benevolent God, they were led down the path of judgement and captivity. But we know this deception goes all the way back to the very beginning. Satan is a liar and the father of lies. He deceived Adam and Eve in the garden with a false message and he has used false teachers to deceive the unsuspecting ever since. In Deuteronomy 13, Moses warned Israel about false prophets who would deceive them by performing signs and wonders to get people to go after false gods. He sees this as so severe a threat that he says that even if it is your brother, your child,

or even the wife you cherish, you must not follow him or her after these false gods. Rather, you must not have pity on them. (Deut. 13:6-10). That seems extreme to us, because in our day and age false doctrine is tolerated. We shrug it off as not being a big deal. But God knew that false teachers would infect many, causing irreparable damage to God's people and it had to be dealt with in such a manner that God's people would understand the gravity of the situation. And the same is true today. We took a couple of months last summer to talk about several false gospels prevalent today and how they have led countless people into a false sense of security, when in many cases, their faith is in vain because they have not believed in the true Gospel and they are on the path to destruction all the while believing they are safe and secure. This is indeed serious business.

It's significant that Peter says that these false teachers will be "among you." Not from outside the church but from within. Paul warned the Ephesian elders of the same thing in Acts 20:29-30 when he said, "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves' men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." He goes on to warn them to be on the alert, to watch out.

Far too often false teachers arise from within the church and often do a lot of damage before they are confronted. If, and when, they leave they always take a lot of people with them who are angry at the church for being so unloving and judgmental. It is true that churches have wrongly split over minor doctrinal disputes, personality conflicts, and other petty issues. Such divisions are sin. But it is also a sin to minimize doctrine to the point where in the name of love and unity, we tolerate false teachers who deny the fundamental doctrines of the faith. These foundational truths include the triune nature of God; the full deity and humanity of Jesus, His virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary atonement on the cross, bodily resurrection, ascension, and personal return. We cannot waver on the essentials of the gospel: that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone. And underlying all of these truths is the divine inspiration, authority and complete infallibility of the Bible.

J. C. Ryle, the 19th century Anglican bishop, wrote in his work, "Warnings to the Churches,"

*"Controversy in religion is a hateful thing. It is hard enough to fight the devil, the world and the flesh, without private differences in our own camp. But there is one thing which is worse than controversy—and that is false doctrine tolerated, allowed, and permitted without protest .... Three things there are which men never ought to trifle with—a little poison, a little false doctrine, and a little sin."*

So just because someone claims to teach the Word of God as a pastor or evangelist does not mean that he or she is sound in the faith. False teachers have always arisen from within the church. And Peter says to us, "Watch out for these false teachers who are a continual threat to God's people.

The second reason Peter gives to watch out for false teachers is because their teachings are subtle and deceptive. Peter says at the end of vs. 1 that these false teachers "will secretly bring in destructive heresies." They will use, as he says in vs. 3, "false words." Interestingly enough, we get our word "plastic" from the Greek word "pseudo" which means "false," "made up," or "fabricated." Remember back in ch. 1, the false teachers were accusing Peter and the other apostles of following "cleverly devised myths," but Peter counters that by saying that they are the ones who are making up their own stories and doctrines. In contrast to the inspired prophets and apostles, who wrote down God's revealed truth in His Word, these false teachers were tools of Satan to promote deception.

The word translated “to secretly bring in” means to introduce from the outside. Any false teaching seeks to add worldly concepts to God’s word and give this newly formed “truth” the same authority as Scripture. False teachers often use Scripture to make themselves sound authentic, but they twist it by bringing in teaching from outside to pervert the true meaning of the text. Often, they are not up-front about their agenda. They cleverly work in a little error here and another error there, until they have taken people into a complete denial of the gospel. Paul warned that just as Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, even so his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:13-15). But they use subtlety and deception to gain followers. Again, we are urged to watch out for such things. All the more reason to be serious about our reading and studying of God’s word so that we are not deceived by that which is false.

The third reason to watch out for false teachers is because their doctrine is destructive. Peter calls their teaching, “destructive heresies.” The word heresy originally was a neutral term that referred to a school of thought or a teaching. It can also refer to factions or divisions within the church (Gal. 5:20; 1 Cor. 11:18; Titus 3:10). But by adding the word “destructive” here, Peter shows that he is talking about seriously wrong doctrine that destroys lives and churches and, if unchecked, leads to eternal judgment.

Peter takes us to the root of their destructive heresy when he adds the phrase “even denying the Master who bought them.” Master is a strong word for sovereign or owner. In the New Testament it was used for the earthly master of slaves or to emphasize God’s absolute lordship. Here it refers to the lordship of Jesus Christ. These false teachers were denying, both by their teaching and lifestyle, the lordship of Jesus Christ as the rightful owner of His people. If someone claims that you can believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and yet not submit to Him as Lord, it is a destructive doctrine. It deceives people into thinking that they are saved because they “accepted Christ” but then they can live however they please. But Jesus said that He will say to such people, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23). On that Day, they will be turned away by the Father because, even though they paid lip service to the idea of believing in Christ, their lives denied “the Master who bought them.”

But that throws us into a few theological controversies that must be dealt with before we can move on. Some would argue that this verse supports the view that those who are saved can lose their salvation. But there are many Scriptures that affirm that God keeps all whom He saves. In John 6:39 Jesus says, “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.” And again in John 10:28 Jesus says, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand.” Peter himself had denied the Master who bought him, yet the Lord did not cast him off but restored him. So, this phrase, “denying the Master who bought them” does not mean that one who is truly saved can lose their salvation.

On the flip side, others use this phrase as proof that Christ’s death was affective for all people, even for those who ultimately reject Him. The Master bought even these false teachers, and all who have been deceived by them. In other words, the verse seems to teach what is called “unlimited atonement or universalism.” The truth is, Christ did die to pay the penalty of sin for all people, but that the benefits of His death only apply to those who trust in Him as Savior and Lord. In other words, Christ’s death made salvation possible for everyone, but actual only for those who believe. It’s like a gift that has been paid for and is being offered. But to be effective, the person must receive the gift.

Therefore, this verse does not teach a true believer can lose their salvation. Nor does it teach that everyone will be saved from the wrath of God toward sin when Jesus comes again. Peter is making a comparison here between the situation in Israel and that in the early church. In the context of warning Israel about false teachers, Moses describes God in Deut. 13:5 as, “the Lord your God who brought you from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery....” Later, Moses rebuked the people, whom he calls “a perverse and crooked generation (Deut. 32:5),” by asking rhetorically in the next verse (Deut. 32:6), “Is not He your Father who has bought you?” In other words, the Old Testament refers to the exodus as God’s redemption, or buying back His people, even though only a remnant among them were truly saved.

Peter applies this analogy to the church. Just as Israel, as a nation, were the redeemed people of God, although not all were saved, so the church is now God’s redeemed people as we read in 1 Pet. 2:9-10, and yet there are some among them who are not truly saved. They professed to be redeemed, but by their deeds they denied Him. So, Peter here is not giving a theological treatment on the extent of the atonement. Rather, he uses the analogy of God’s people being bought by the Master to show the heinous nature of the false teachers’ sin. They associated with God’s chosen people, the church. The Master bought the church, just as God bought or redeemed Israel through the Exodus. Yet these false teachers did not obey Him. They denied the Master who bought them and the result for them and all that follow them will be an ultimate destruction.

The next reason we are to watch out for false teachers is because their influence is attractive. Look at vs. 2 again. It says, “Many will follow their sensuality.” These false teachers had a large following. They were “successful!” It is amazing how the Christian world thinks that if a man has a huge following, he must be sound in the faith. If he builds a megachurch, the Christian world looks to him as a leader, without ever questioning what he teaches. I can tell you right now, some of the largest churches in the world are being led by false prophets and teachers who are promising health and wealth to their congregations, all the while making themselves rich off the unhindered adoration of their followers. Folks like Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn and Joel Osteen cater to the pride of our flesh. They do not preach against sin. They do not mention divine judgment or hell. They avoid truths like denying yourself, taking up your cross, and following Christ no matter what the cost. Rather, they soothe people with uplifting thoughts about how much God loves you and wants you to have your best life now. If they ever mention the death of Christ, they say that He died because He believed in your great worth. Now, all you need to do is believe in yourself and ask God to help you fulfill your dreams. People follow that kind of false teaching by the droves, because it feeds their pride. Like the forbidden fruit in the garden that was pleasing to the eye, these teachings are attractive but they but they ultimately lead to death.

Another reason to watch out for false teachers is because their motivations are impure. Peter shows that these men are driven by two related evil motives: sensuality and greed. At the root of both of these motives is their own self-centeredness and pride. They want to exploit their followers to gratify themselves. There is always a connection between false doctrine and impure living. Sometimes it is difficult to figure out which came first, but always, they are intertwined. False doctrine leads to ungodly living. Peter’s point here is we, as Christ’s followers, can discern when someone is really teaching God’s word or not by checking their motives. Again, back to the John 10 passage, Jesus says, “My sheep know my voice.” By checking the motives of those who claim to teach the word of God will give us a glimpse into who they really are.

The sixth reason Peter gives us to watch out for false teachers is because their teachings dishonor to the way of the truth. Peter says again in vs. 2, “because of them the way of the truth

will be blasphemed.” The Christian faith is the way of truth because Jesus Himself is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). But when we who are professing Christians do not live according to the truth of God’s Word, unbelievers mock and disregard the truth. I don’t need to remind you of all of the cases where high profile church leaders have fallen in disgrace in financial and sexual scandals. While not always the case, because we are all human and have a sinful nature, one key marker in identifying false teachers is in the aftermath of scandal. Is their genuine humility and repentance or excuses and blaming others. Either way, when this type of things happens it allows others outside of the church to question the validity of our message.

The final reason to watch out for false teachers is because they and all that follow them are heading toward eternal destruction. Peter uses the word “destruction” 5 of the 18 times that it appears in the New Testament. He speaks of “destructive heresies” and the “swift destruction,” which the false teachers will bring on themselves. He adds in v. 3, “their judgment from long ago is not idle and their destruction is not asleep.”

The fact that these wicked men’s judgment is from long ago means that God declared judgment on false teachers in the Old Testament, centuries before. The phrase, “their destruction is not asleep” personifies destruction as an executioner, always ready to administer God’s sentence on those who teach and follow false doctrine. Again, Peter is not talking about minor doctrinal differences, but rather about false teachings that lead people to damnation. He does not seem to hold out any hope that these false teachers could be reclaimed for the truth. But he wrote to warn us, so that we would not be taken in by their destructive doctrines.

Brothers and sisters, we must be very careful who we listen to and follow. There are lots of voices out there on the radio, television, the Internet, and in books and they all present themselves as teachers of God’s people. Many of them are genuine and are very helpful to the body of Christ and we thank God for them. But others of them are false teachers who will only bring destruction on those who listen to them. And so, it really is up to you and me, by the enabling power of the Holy Spirit and by the reading and study of God’s word, to be discerning and to heed the words of Peter to us to watch out for and be careful who we listen to.

God has provided us with all that we need for life and godliness through faith in His Son. But as we build on that faith, we absolutely must be alert to the persuasions and perversions of false teachers who will make their way into the household of God. May God Himself help us to make sure that we don’t fall prey to such false teachings. This requires faith. Faith in exile.